“We the People” –
The Process of Electoral Politics

Winston Churchill once observed, “It has been said that democracy is the worst form of government except all the others that have been tried.” Yet to understand what it means to say that a government is democratic, we must understand the practices of governing institutions and the people who are elected to run them. How are the candidates for public office selected? How are elections organized and conducted? Who may (and may not) vote? What laws or practices facilitate voting or discourage various groups of citizens from participating in elections?

We must also understand how our elected representatives execute their duties. What is the role of party politics in developing and passing legislation? How do partisan politics affect which issues are considered and how legislative actions about them are framed? How are relationships among elected officials, the permanent bureaucracy, the military, and the judiciary conceived and carried out? How do relations between nation states affect internal political processes?

Throughout its history the Center has awarded fellowships to an impressive list of scholars whose research has provided insight into these questions. More than 250 Fellows from the fields of political science, history, sociology, philosophy, public policy, and economics have made significant contributions to a broad range of important issues related to electoral politics while they were in residence at the Center.

From the right to vote to the way we vote
Historian Alexander Keyssar of the Kennedy School at Harvard University wrote substantial portions of his award-winning book *The Right to Vote: The Contested History of Democracy in the United States* while he was a Fellow in 1998-99. Keyssar’s study details the strategies used by both major parties throughout our history to make it difficult or even impossible for constituents hostile to their causes to register to vote.

Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School of Communication, spent the 2003-04 fellowship year writing up the results of interviews she and her colleagues conducted with some 100,000 registered voters during the 2000 presidential election. She tracked the influence of presidential candidates’ speeches and debates on voter opinion, in order to measure how television and other components of the national media affect presidential elections. She is doing a similar analysis for the 2004 presidential elections.
Henry Brady (Fellow 2002), political scientist at the University of California, Berkeley, completed a book reporting on the results of his ground-breaking study about the performance of different forms of voting technologies in the United States and the impact of each on voter turnout and vote counting.

Sociologist Jeff Manza of Northwestern University (Fellow 2002) has studied the likely impact on national elections of the disfranchisement of the nearly 6 million United States citizens who are convicted felons, 4 million of whom are no longer imprisoned.

**An international perspective**

Other Center Fellows have conducted important studies of voter turnout, political corruption, and legislative initiatives in the United States by comparing practices in our country with those in other advanced industrialized nations, including Italy, Spain, France, The Netherlands, Britain, Japan, India, and Scandinavian and Latin American countries. One of these scholars, political scientist Robert Jackman (Fellow 1987) of the University of California, Davis, studied voter turnout in advanced industrial democracies and showed that national differences in electoral laws explain differences in voter turnout far better than variations in political culture do.

**Congressional elections**

The United States Congress has been the subject of investigation by many Center Fellows. Their interest has been in understanding the dynamics of partisan politics over time. Political scientist David W. Brady (Fellow 1980, 2002) of Stanford University has conducted a study of the outcome of every congressional election in United States history, and two other political scientists—Howard Rosenthal (Fellow 1992, 1999) of Princeton University and Keith Poole (Fellow 2004) of the University of Houston—have compiled data on every roll call vote ever taken in the United States Congress. Together the data from these two studies have enabled political scientists to locate current trends in partisan politics and elections in the widest possible historical perspective. Their work, in turn, has been supplemented by studies done by other Center scholars on such topics as presidential primaries, initiatives and referendums, redistricting, partisan politics under conditions of unified and divided government, the role of the media in politics, and the role of gender and race in partisan political debate.

**Toward a more informed citizenry: Deliberative Polling**

One of the most ambitious and innovative research programs on electoral politics has been undertaken by political scientist James Fishkin, formerly of the University of Texas and now at Stanford University. While a Fellow in 1987-88, Fishkin wrote a book titled *Democracy and Deliberation*, in which he speculated about what public opinion would look like if respondents were effectively motivated to behave more like ideal citizens—that is, if they had access to good information, could hear opposing points of view, and could come to thoughtful judgments. He then developed a procedure to answer his fundamental question. Termed “Deliberative Polling,” the method entails selecting a single issue (e.g., welfare reform, the federal deficit, American foreign policy, trade policy) and drawing a random sample of the population of registered voters to be educated about it. These participants are given a questionnaire to complete and then invited to come together for a weekend of discussions. Between the initial interview and the deliberative weekend, they are given briefing materials, carefully vetted for balance and accuracy. During the weekend, they discuss the issues in randomly assigned small groups, led by trained moderators. They also ask questions emerging from their discussions of balanced panels of experts, politicians, and decision-makers in plenary sessions. After two to four days of the deliberative process, they complete the questionnaire again.
Deliberative Polling is a new instrument of democratic consultation, an effort to elevate the public dialogue. Before the 2004 presidential primaries, Fishkin and his colleagues conducted eleven Deliberative Polls in the United States, five in Britain, two in Australia, and one in Denmark. Eight of these events employed national random samples of registered voters; the others relied on randomly drawn local or regional samples. The national Deliberative Polls conducted in the United States have all been televised with Jim Lehrer of the “The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer” as moderator. Fishkin and his colleagues are now analyzing results from another series of Deliberative Polls in eight cities throughout the United States, and results were aired on PBS stations throughout the country in early February 2004.

During the 2001-02 fellowship year, Fishkin and his colleagues, who include Bruce Ackerman (law and political science, Yale University), David W. Brady (political science, Stanford University), Henry Brady (political science, University of California, Berkeley), Robert Luskin (political science, University of Texas), and Jane Mansbridge (political science and public policy, Harvard University), gathered at the Center to review the results of the Deliberative Polls that had been conducted to that point and to plan the current round. Results from so many experiments are not easily summarized, but a few consistent findings are worth noting. The investigators report, for example, that deliberation:

- Produces significant net attitude changes
- Results in more informed citizens
- Results in participants acquiring more balanced views on issues
- Enhances civic engagement
- Contributes to a heightened sense of public spirit
- Reduces polarization
- Results in genuine changes in voting behavior

The generation of distinguished Fellows whose pioneering work has enhanced our understanding of democracy in action has spawned a new generation of younger scholars whose programs of research build on, broaden, and deepen the work of their mentors. The Center, a pivotal factor in the work of the pioneers, looks forward to similarly encouraging a new cohort of researchers.
Bibliography